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SOME POPULAR FALLACIES ABOUT VIVISECTION.

by
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SOME POPULAR FALLACIES ABOUT VIVISECTION.

At a time when this painful subject is engrossing so large a share of public attention, no apology, I trust, is needed for the following attempt to formulate and classify some of the many fallacies, as they seem to me, which I have met with in the writings of those who advocate the practice. No greater service can be rendered to the cause of truth, in this fiercely contested field, than to reduce these shadowy, impalpable phantoms into definite forms, which can be seen, which can be grappled with, and which, when once fairly *laid*, we shall not need to exorcise a second time.

I begin with two contradictory propositions, which seem to constitute the two extremes, containing between them the golden mean of truth :—

1. *That the infliction of pain on animals is a right of man, needing no justification.*

2. *That it is in no case justifiable.*

The first of these is assumed in practice by many who would hardly venture to outrage the common feelings of humanity by stating it in terms. All who recognise the difference of right and wrong must admit, if the question be closely pressed, that the infliction of pain is in *some* cases wrong. Those who deny it are not likely to be amenable to argument. For what common ground have we? They must be restrained, like brute beasts, by physical force.

The second has been assumed by an Association lately formed for the total suppression of Vivisection, in whose manifesto it is placed in the same category with Slavery, as being an absolute evil, with which no terms can be made. I think I may assume that the proposition most generally accepted is an intermediate one, namely, that the infliction of pain is in some cases justifiable, but not in all.

3. *That our right to inflict pain on animals is co-extensive with our right to kill, or even to exterminate a race (which prevents the existence of possible animals) all being alike infringements of their rights.*

This is one of the commonest and most misleading of all the fallacies. Mr. Freeman, in an article on Field Sports and Vivisection, which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* for May, 1874, appears to countenance this when he classes death with pain together, as if they were admitted to be homogeneous. For example—

“By cruelty then I understand, as I have understood throughout, not all infliction of death or suffering on man or beast, but their wrongful or needless infliction. . . . My positions then were two. First . . . that certain cases of the infliction of death or suffering on brute creatures may be blameworthy. The second was, that all infliction of death or suffering for the purpose of mere sport is one of those blameworthy cases.”

But in justice to Mr. Freeman I ought also to quote the following sentence, in which he takes the opposite view: “I must in all cases draw a wide distinction between mere killing and torture.”

In discussing the “rights of animals,” I think

I may pass by, as needing no remark, the so-called right of a race of animals to be perpetuated, and the still more shadowy right of a non-existent animal to come into existence. The only question worth consideration is whether the killing of an animal is a real infringement of right. Once grant this, and a *reductio ad absurdum* is imminent, unless we are illogical enough to assign rights to animals in proportion to their size. Never may we destroy, for our convenience, some of a litter of puppies—or open a score of oysters when nineteen would have sufficed—or light a candle in a summer evening for mere pleasure, lest some hapless moth should rush to an untimely end! Nay, we must not even take a walk, with the the certainty of crushing many an insect in our path, unless for really important business! Surely all this is childish. In the absolute hopelessness of drawing a line anywhere, I conclude (and I believe that many, on considering the point, will agree with me) that man has an *absolute* right to inflict death on animals, without assigning any reason, provided that it be a painless death, but that any infliction of pain needs its special justification.

4. *That man is infinitely more important than the lower animals, so that the infliction of animal suffering, however great, is justifiable if it prevent human suffering, however small.*

This fallacy can be assumed only when unexpressed. To put it into words is almost to refute it. Few, even in an age where selfishness has almost become a religion, dare openly avow a selfishness so hideous as this! While there are

thousands, I believe, who would be ready to assure the vivisectors that, so far as their personal interests are concerned, they are ready to forego any prospect they may have of a diminution of pain, if it can only be secured by the infliction of so much pain on innocent creatures.

But I have a more serious charge than that of selfishness to bring against the scientific men who make this assumption. They use it dishonestly, recognising it when it tells in their favour, and ignoring it when it tells against them. For does it not pre-suppose the axiom that human and animal suffering differ *in kind*? A strange assertion this, from the lips of people who tell us that man is twin-brother to the monkey! Let them be at least consistent, and when they have proved that the lessening of the *human* suffering is an end so great and glorious as to justify any means that will secure it, let them give the anthropomorphoid ape the benefit of the argument. Further than that I will not ask them to go, but will resign them in confidence to the guidance of an exorable logic.

Had they only the candour and courage to do it, I believe that they would choose the other horn of the dilemma, and would reply, "Yes, man *is* in the same category as the brute; and just as we care not (you see it, so we cannot deny it) how much pain we inflict on the one, so we care not, unless when deterred by legal penalties, how much we inflict on the other. The lust for scientific knowledge is our real guiding principle. The lessening of human suffering is a mere dummy set up to amuse sentimental dreamers.

I now come to another class of fallacies—those involved in the comparison, so often made, between vivisection and field-sports. If the theory, that the two are essentially similar, involved no worse consequence than that sport should be condemned by all who condemn vivisection, I should be by no means anxious to refute it. Unfortunately the other consequence is just as logical, and just as likely, that vivisection should be approved of by all who approve of sport.

The comparison rests on the assumption that the main evil laid to the charge of vivisection is the pain inflicted on the animal. This assumption I propose to deal with, further on, as a fallacy: at present I will admit it for the sake of argument, hoping to show, that, even on this hypothesis, the vivisectors have a very poor case. In making this comparison their first claim is—

5. *That it is fair to compare aggregates of pain.*

“The aggregates amount of wrong”—I quote from an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for February 13th—“which is perpetrated against animals by sportsmen in a single year probably exceeds that which some of them endure from vivisectors in half a century.” The best refutation of this fallacy would seem to be to trace it to its logical conclusion—that a very large number of trivial wrongs are equal to one great one. For instance, that a man, who by selling adulterated bread inflicts a minute injury on the health of some thousands of persons, commits a crime equal to one murder. Once grasp this *reductio ad absurdum*, and you will be ready to allow that the

only fair comparison is between individual and individual.

Supposing the vivisectors forced to abandon this position, they may then fall back on the next parallel—

6. *That the pain inflicted on an individual animal in vivisection is not greater than in sport.*

I am no sportsman, and so have no right to dogmatize, but I am tolerably sure that all sportsmen will agree with me that this is untrue of shooting, in which, whenever the creature is killed at once, it is probably as painless a form of death as could be devised ; while the sufferings of one that escapes wounded ought to be laid to the charge of unskilful sport, not of sport in the abstract. Probably much of the same might be said of fishing : for other forms of sport, and especially for hunting, I have no defence to offer, believing that they involve very great cruelty.

Even if the last two fallacies were granted to the advocates of vivisection, their use in the argument must depend on the following proposition being true :—

7. *That the evil charged against vivisection consists chiefly in the pain inflicted on the animal.*

I maintain, on the contrary, that it consists chiefly in the effect produced on the operator. To use the words of Mr. Freeman, in the article already quoted, “ the question is not as to the aggregate amount of suffering inflicted, but as to the moral character of the acts by which the suffering is inflicted.” We see this most clearly, when we shift our view from the act itself to its

remoter consequences. The hapless animal suffers, dies, "and there an end": but the man whose sympathies have been deadened, and whose selfishness has been fostered, by the contemplation of pain deliberately inflicted, may be the parent of others equally brutalised, and so bequeath a curse to future ages. And even if we limit our view to the present time, who can doubt that the degradation of a soul is a greater evil than the suffering of a bodily frame? Even if driven to admit this, the advocates of the practice may still assert—

8. *That vivisection has no demoralising effect on the character of the operator.*

"Look at our surgeons!" they may exclaim. "Are they a demoralised or a brutalised class? Yet you must admit that, in the operations they have to perform, they are perpetually contemplating pain—aye, and pain deliberately inflicted by their own hands." The analogy is not a fair one; since the *immediate* motive—of saving the life, or diminishing the sufferings, of the person operated on—is a counteracting influence in surgery, to which vivisection, with its shadowy hope of some day relieving the sufferings of some human being yet unborn, has nothing parallel to offer. This, however, is a question to be decided by evidence, not by argument. History furnishes us with but too many examples of the degradation of character produced by the deliberate pitiless contemplation of suffering. The effect of the national bull-fights on the Spanish character is a case in point. But we need not go to Spain for evidence: the following extract from the

Echo, quoted in the *Spectator* for March 20th, will be enough to enable the reader to judge for himself what sort of effect this practice is likely to have on the minds of the students :—

“ But if yet more be necessary to satisfy the public minds on this latter point ” (the effect on the operators), “ the testimony of an English physiologist, known to the writer, may be useful in conclusion. He was present some time past at a lecture, in the course of which demonstrations were made on living dogs. When the unfortunate creatures cried and moaned under the operation, many of the students *actually mimicked their cries in derision* ! The gentleman who related this occurrence adds that the spectacle of the writhing animals and the fiendish behaviour of the audience so sickened him, that he could not wait for the conclusion of the lecture, but took his departure in disgust.”

It is a humiliating but an undeniable truth, that man has something of the wild beast in him, that a thirst for blood can be aroused in him by witnessing a scene of carnage, and that the infliction of torture, when the first instincts of horror have been deadened by the familiarity, may become, first, a matter of indifference, then a subject of morbid interest, then a positive pleasure, and then a ghastly and ferocious delight.

Here again, however, the analogy of sport is of some service to the vivisector, and he may plead that the influence we dread is already at work among our sportsmen. This I will now consider.

9. *That vivisection does not demoralise the character more than sport.*

The opponents' case would not, I think, suffer much even if this were admitted ; but I am inclined to demur to it as a universal truth. We must remember that much of the excitement and interest of sport depend on causes entirely unconnected with the infliction of pain, which is rather ignored than deliberately contemplated ; whereas in vivisection the painful effects constitute in many cases a part, in some cases the whole, of the interest felt by the spectator. And all they tell us of the highly developed intellect of the anatomical student, with which they contrast so contemptuously the low animal instincts of the fox-hunter, is but another argument against themselves ; for surely the nobler the being we degrade, the greater is the injury we inflict on society. *Corruptio optimi pessima.*

“ But all this ignores the *motive* of the action,” cry the vivisectors. “ What is it in sport ? Mere pleasure. In this matter we hold an impregnable position.” Let us see.

10. *That, while the motive in sport is essentially selfish, in vivisection it is essentially unselfish.*

It is my conviction that the non-scientific world is far too ready to attribute to the advocates of science all the virtues they are so ready to claim ; and when they put forward their favourite *ad captandum* argument that their labours are undergone for one pure motive—the good of humanity—society is far too ready to exclaim, with Mrs. Varden, “ Here is a meek, righteous, thorough-going Christian, who, having dropped

a pinch of salt on the tails of all the cardinal virtues, and caught them every one, makes light of their possession, and pants for more morality !” In other words, society is far too ready to accept the picture of the pale, worn devotee of science giving his days and nights to irksome and thankless toil, spurred on by no other motive than a boundless philanthropy. As one who has himself devoted much time and labour to scientific investigations, I desire to offer the strongest possible protest against this falsely coloured picture. I believe that any branch of science, when taken up by one who has a natural turn for it, will soon become as fascinating as sport to the most ardent sportsman, or as any form of pleasure to the most refined sensualist. The claim that hard work, or the endurance of privation, proves the existence of an unselfish motive, is simply monstrous. Grant to me that the miser is proved unselfish when he stints himself of food and sleep to add one more piece of gold to his secret hoard, that the place-hunter is proved unselfish when he toils through long years to reach the goal of his ambition, and I will grant to you that the laborious pursuit of science is proof positive of an unselfish motive. Of course I do not assert, of even a single scientific student, that his real motive is merely that craving for more knowledge, whether useful or useless, which is as natural an appetite as the craving for novelty or any other form of excitement. I only say that the lower motive would account for the observed conduct quite as well as the higher.

Yet, after all, the whole argument, deduced from a comparison of vivisection with sport, rests on the following proposition, which I claim to class as a fallacy :—

11. *That toleration of one form of an evil necessitates the toleration of all others.*

Grant this, and you simply paralyze all conceivable efforts at reformation. How can we talk of putting down cruelty to animals when drunkenness is rampant in the land? You would propose, then, to legislate in the interests of sobriety? Shame on you! Look at the unseaworthy ships in which our gallant sailors are risking their lives! What! Organize a crusade against dishonest ship-owners, while our streets swarm with a population growing up in heathen ignorance! We can but reply, *non omnia possumus omnes*. And surely the man who sees his way to diminish in any degree a single one of the myriad evils around him, may well lay to heart the saying of a wise man of old, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.”

The last parallel to which the advocates of vivisection may be expected to retreat, supposing all these positions to be found untenable, is the assertion—

12. *That legislation would only increase the evil.*

The plea, if I understand it aright, amounts to this,—that legislation would probably encourage many to go beyond the limit with which at present they are content, as soon as they found that a legal limit had been fixed beyond their own. Granting this to be the tendency of human nature,

what is the remedy usually adopted in other cases? A stricter limit, or the abandonment of all limits? Suppose a case—that in a certain town it were proposed to close all taverns at midnight, and that the opponents of the measure urged, “At present some close at eleven—a most desirable hour: if you pass this law, all will keep open till midnight.” What would the answer be? “Then let us do nothing,” or “Then let us fix eleven, instead of twelve, as our limit?” Surely this does not need many words: the principle of doing evil that good may come is not likely to find many defenders, even in this modern disguise of forbearing to do good lest evil should come. We may safely take our stand on the principle of doing the duty which we see before us: secondary consequences are at once out of our control and beyond our calculation.

Let me now collect into one paragraph the contradictions of some of these fallacies (which I have here rather attempted to formulate and classify than to refute, or even fully discuss), and so exhibit in one view the case of the opponents of vivisection. It is briefly this—

That while we do not deny the absolute right of man to end the lives of the lower animals by a painless death, we require good and sufficient cause to be shown for all infliction of pain.

That the prevention of suffering to a human being does not justify the infliction of a greater amount of suffering on an animal.

That the chief evil of the practice of vivisection consists in its effect on the moral character of the operator; and that this effect is distinctly

demoralising and brutalising.

That hard work and endurance of privations are no proof of an unselfish motive.

That the toleration of one form of an evil is no excuse for tolerating another.

Lastly, that the risk of legislation increasing the evil is not enough to make all legislation undesirable.

We have now, I think, seen good reasons to suspect that the principle of selfishness lies at the root of this accursed practice. That the same principle is probably the cause of the indifference with which its growth among us is regarded, is not perhaps so obvious. Yet I believe this indifference to be based on a tacit assumption, which I propose to notice as the last of this long catalogue of fallacies—

13. *That the practice of vivisection will never be extended so as to include human subjects.*

That is, in other words, that while science arrogates to herself the right of torturing at her pleasure the whole sentient creation up to man himself, some inscrutable boundary line is there drawn, over which she will never venture to pass. "Let the galled jade wince, *our* withers are unwrung."

Not improbably, when that stately Levite of old was pacing with dainty step the road that led from Jerusalem to Jericho, "bemused with thinking of tithe-concerns," and doing his best to look unconscious of the prostrate form on the other side of the way, if it could have been whispered in his ear, "*Your* turn comes next to

fall among the thieves !” some sudden thrill of pity might have been aroused in him : he might even, at the risk of soiling those rich robes, have joined the Samaritan in his humane task of tending the wounded man. And surely the easy-going Levites of our own time would take an altogether new interest in this matter, could they only realise the possible advent of a day when anatomy shall claim, as legitimate subjects for experiment, first, our condemned criminals—next, perhaps, the inmates of our refuges for incurables—then the hopeless lunatic, the pauper hospital-patient, and generally “ him that hath no helper,”—a day when successive generations of students, trained from their earliest years to the repression of all human sympathies, shall have developed a new and more hideous Frankenstein—a soulless being to whom science shall be all in all.

Homo sum ! quidvis humanum a me alienum puto.

And when that day shall come, O my brother-man, you who claim for yourself and for me so proud an ancestry—tracing our pedigree through the anthropomorphoid ape up to the primeval zoophyte—what potent spell have *you* in store to win exemption from the common doom ? Will you represent to that grim spectre, as he gloats over you, scalpel in hand, the inalienable rights of man ? He will tell you that this is merely a question of relative expediency,—that, with so feeble a physique as yours, you have only to be thankful that natural selection has spared you so long. Will you reproach him with the needless torture he proposes to inflict upon you ? He

will smilingly assure you that the *hyperæsthesia*, which he hopes to induce, is in itself a most interesting phenomenon, deserving much patient study. Will you then, gathering up all your strength for one last desperate appeal, plead with him as with a fellow-man, and with an agonized cry for "Mercy!" seek to rouse some dormant spark of pity in that icy breast? Ask it rather of the nether mill-stone.

